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Hold'em Brain: Extra Topics

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Monte Hall Problem in Hold'em

The Monte Hall Problem is a very popular problem that is confusing to many people. The problem is often misrepresented or misinterpreted by the one presenting the question. Many times, the confusion is due to the person asking the question not phrasing the question correctly or not providing all of the pertinent information. Here is my attempt to explain it succinctly, and apply it to a Hold'em situation.

The setup to the Monte Hall problem is that you are a contestant in a game show and Monte Hall is the show host. He will give you a product (like an electronic device), but then offer you a choice to exchange the product. Usually the result of the deal that he offers you is unclear. You have to make a decision with uncertainty. If you choose to make the deal, then you will have to play a game (it could be as simple as choosing between what is behind door A or door B). If you get lucky, you may wind up with a much better product or nothing at all. What makes the show interesting is that the contestants are sometimes asked to make decisions that are tough and counterintuitive. The famous Monte Hall problem is one of those that are counterintuitive.

In the problem, there are three doors. Behind one of the doors is a brand new car, behind the other two doors are goats. The contestant does not know which objects are behind each door, but presumably the contestant would prefer to win the new car over a goat. The contestant is asked to choose a door, and the object behind the chosen door now belongs to him. The game is not over though. Before Monte Hall reveals what is behind the contestant's door, he now opens one of the other doors to reveal a goat. Then he says to the contestant "You may choose to switch to the other unopened door if you wish." If the contestant switches, does he increase his chances of winning a car?

As is often the answer to the poker question of "How should I play this hand?", the answer to the Monte Hall problem as it is presented above is "It depends." If it was presented slightly differently, the answer would be clearer. The difference is whether you knew ahead of time that Monte Hall would always open up a door with a goat behind it and offer you to switch to the third door. This is an important fact and makes a big difference in the problem. Oftentimes, when others present the problem, they do not make it clear if this is true or not.

If you knew in advance that Monte Hall is 100% guaranteed to open up a door and show you a goat and offer you to switch after you have already picked a door, then the answer is yes, you should switch.

If you were not sure in advance if Monte Hall would offer you a deal, then you simply don't know. Is he bluffing by offering you to switch because he knows you have picked the car? Did he

already plan to show you a goat behind one door and offer you the contents behind the other door even before you made the first choice? What is your opinion of Monte Hall as a person, is he nefarious and wants you to get the goat, or is he generous and wants you to increase your chances of winning the car? What is your opinion of the intelligence of Monte Hall? Is he smart enough to realize that if he always shows you a goat and offers you to switch doors that he is increasing your chances of winning the car or does he think that the choice does not matter?

Let's assume the scenario where it is 100% guaranteed that Monte Hall knows what is behind each door and will always show you a goat behind one of the doors whether or not you picked the door with the car behind it. Then he will offer you to switch to the third door that is not yet open. Given that this is the case, then Monte Hall will always show you a door with a goat behind it, whether or not the door you have chosen has a car or a goat behind it. 1/3 of the time, the first door you chose will have a car behind it. That means 2/3 of the time, the car is behind one of the other doors. Since you knew that Monte will always open up one of the doors with a goat behind it that means if you switch, you will go from a 1/3 chance to a 2/3 chance.

One of the problems with this answer is that many people confuse this issue and think the chances are 1/2 for both the door that you originally picked and the remaining door since there are only two unopened doors left. They neglect the fact that if the car was behind one of the doors that you did not originally choose, then Monte Hall would not open that door because he knows that the car is behind it, and he is not going to show you the car. Monte would only open the door with the goat behind it if the other door had the car behind it. Thus 2/3 of the time (because 2/3 of the time you have picked the incorrect door, and the car is behind one of the other two doors), Monte has no choice but to open the one door that has the goat behind it. The other 1/3 of the time, he can randomly decide which door he wants to open. This means that 2/3 of the time, the door that Monte did not open will have the car behind it, and the other 1/3 of the time there will be a goat behind the other door because you already picked the correct door with the car behind it. So if we knew with 100% certainty that Monte Hall would open up a door with a goat behind it and offer us to switch cars, whether we chose a door with the goat behind it or we chose a door with the car behind it, then we will increase our chances of winning the car from 1/3 to 2/3, a very significant improvement.

Here is an illustration of the Monte Hall problem.

Door / Contents	If you chose door A, Monte will show you:	If you chose door B, Monte will show you:	If you chose door C, Monte will show you:
A - Car			
B - Goat	either B or C		B
C - Goat	either B or C	C	
If you switch to the 3 rd door	You will get a goat	You will get the car	You will get the car

However, what happens if Monte Hall sometimes does not offer you the choice of switching? What if sometimes Monte will simply open up the door that you chose? If that is the case, then you need to know that if he offers you to switch doors, then maybe he is trying to bait you to switch to a worse door and away from the door with the car behind it. Maybe Monte does not want you to win the car and will only ask if you would like to switch doors if you actually chose the door with the car behind it. In order to actually take Monte's offer and switch doors and think you are going from a $1/3$ chance to a $2/3$ chance, you have to be incredibly confident that he will always ask if you want to switch no matter what you chose, and that he does not have a nefarious reason to ask you if you want to switch. This is incredibly important and pertinent information to the problem, and yet many people who present the problem fail to make the facts crystal clear. The problem is already a difficult one to understand conceptually, and the omission of this important fact merely makes it even more confusing to many.

How does the understanding of this problem apply to Limit Hold'em? Well, there are some situations where your opponent is guaranteed to bet. Given certain opponents and certain situations, you may be 100% certain that your opponent will bet. If you know that your opponent is 100% to bet, then that means his bet has no bearings on the quality of his hand. You cannot base any of your reasoning of why your opponent has bet on the latest new piece of information. Of course, you may need to readjust the value of your own holdings based on the new information. The key is that you cannot adjust the value of your opponents holdings based on the new information since he would have acted identically no matter what the new piece of information was. This situation typically presents itself more often in shorthanded games than in full games. Just like in the Monte Hall problem, where you knew Monte would show you a door with a goat behind it and ask if you wanted to switch, you knew that the chances you picked the correct door was $1/3$, and it is still $1/3$ even after Monte opened one of the doors for you.

Applying the Monte Hall problem to Hold'em

It is a 4-handed game. You are in the big blind and the player on the button open-raises. For the purposes of this example, your cards are not pertinent. The player on the button is a very aggressive raiser when he is on the button in this game, and you are very sure that he will raise with a wide range of hands. The small blind folds and you decide to call.

Flop: $9\clubsuit-9\heartsuit-2\spadesuit$

You check, and your opponent bets.

This is the point where you knew that your opponent would bet 100% of the time, regardless of the strength of his holdings and the quality of the Flop. He is an aggressive player, you have played many hours of shorthanded play with this guy and you have always seen him make this bet. This is a situation where your aggressive opponent is 100% guaranteed to bet, no matter what two cards he holds. So his bet gives you absolutely no new information about his possible holdings. Your estimate of the hand that your opponent holds should stay the same as before the Flop. Similarly in the Monte Hall problem, your estimate of the chances that you had picked the door with the car behind it stays the same even after Monte Hall showed you the goat behind one of the other doors

and asked if you wanted to switch, because you knew he would make those actions.

ALL-IN SITUATIONS

When one of the players is out of chips in the middle of a hand, he is considered all-in, and he gets to see the rest of the hand played out through the River. If there is just one other player left in the hand, then the dealer simply deals out the rest of the hand and then asks for the winner to reveal his hand. If there are more than one player still in the hand, and one of them is all-in, then a side pot is created. The player who is all-in cannot win the side pot, but can only win the main pot. The other players can win both the side pot and the main pot.

It is important when betting to consider when someone is already all-in or is close to going all-in. Sometimes a player closer to being all-in is frustrated, because they are in that situation because they are in the midst of a losing session. If they raise, sometimes they are raising just to get all-in and get the betting over with so they can see if they have won. It is useful to understand the type of player that may do this so that you do not misinterpret their aggressiveness for anything else other than the fact that they just want to get to that point as soon as possible.

Playing against a player who is almost all-in

It is important to be aware when one of the players at the table is almost all-in. Many times these players will play more aggressively especially when there are already a lot of players in the pot. They want to get maximum value for their money and they figure that going all-in early when other players are already committed to seeing the Flop will accomplish this feat. A typical example occurs when several players have already limped in, and a player in late position or in the blinds raises and goes all-in. They may be raising with a hand that they would not normally raise with. They may normally just call with this hand. The thought process here is that since they are going to go all-in pretty soon anyway, it is better to go all-in now to get maximum value for their hand. When this happens, you do not want to be folding a hand thinking he really is on a legitimate raise. If you knew that he was raising just to go all-in, then you have more incentive to call. Even if you think he has a legitimate raising hand, you know this player will not be able to pressure you further on future rounds.

Even if you do not believe a lone opponent who is almost all-in is playing differently, you still need to know that he is almost all-in. The reason is that the expected pot size will be different which of course may affect your pot odds calculations and affect your decision. You need to think your way through the hand as different situations may come up. Here's an example when you wind up heads-up against a player who is almost all-in and you flop a great hand.

You raise pre-Flop with AK in a \$20-\$40 limit Hold'em game. The only caller is the big blind who only started the hand with \$65. After putting in his big blind and calling your bet, he only has \$25 left.

Your hand: AKo

Flop: K-9-7 rainbow

He checks. Normally it would be correct to bet, but it may not be so when your opponent is almost all-in. You want to increase the chance that he will put in all his chips. Giving him free cards is not as dangerous since there are no overcards to your hand. Almost any hand that he could have

that would benefit from getting a free card is a hand that he would have called on the Flop anyway and will almost always call on the Turn as well.

For example, assume he had T9, and has a pair of 9's on the Flop. If you bet on the Flop, he would call or raise and be all-in. If you check, you will still get him to put his chips in on the Turn anyway regardless of what card comes (the only card that may deter him from calling may be an A, in which case, you may wait until the River to bet). If he had a draw with QT, he would probably call if you bet on the Flop or if you bet on the Turn as well, with or without correct pot odds. If you catch a bad beat and a J comes on the Turn or River, you should comfort yourself knowing that he would have gone all-in on the Flop if you had bet anyway. So with these two hands, it makes no difference if you bet on the Flop or wait for the Turn to bet.

The hands that he could have that can matter are hands such as A3 and J8. These are hands that he is likely to fold if you bet on the Flop. If you check on the Flop, he may bet out on the Turn hoping to buy the pot even if he does not catch a pair. If he is a bit more conservative, he may not bet out with nothing, but he will if he catches a pair. Since you have a pair of K's with the A kicker, you only need to worry about your opponent catching runner-runner trips or two pair. The tradeoff between that unlikely event and getting your opponent to risk his remaining chips when he is a major underdog should make you lean towards checking on the Flop.

Players who are almost all-in are unlikely to fold after they have bet or raised

If a player only has one bet or less left in their stack after they have made a bet, it becomes very difficult to bluff them out of the pot. They may or may not have a good hand, but typically they already have the mentality that they are going to go all-in. Even if they feel they are behind, they will often just throw in the rest of the chips when someone raises and start digging into their pockets expecting to lose. Of course this is a generality, and not all players are alike, but it is useful to be aware of it.

In order to take advantage of this phenomenon, you need to bet with all marginal hands into a player who is close to going all-in, and forgo semi-bluffing or bluffing. If it is down to just you and the player who is almost all-in, don't be afraid to raise him all-in with a top pair/weak kicker or middle pair. However, don't raise him all-in if you only have an inside straight.

Here's a typical situation where you should have no fear of making the extra raise to put him all-in.

Your hand: T9o

Flop: K-T-8 rainbow

Your opponent had raised in late position, and you had called in the big blind. You check to him and he bets, leaving him with only one more small bet left. Even though you only have middle pair, you should feel comfortable raising and making him go all-in at this point. If you do check-raise here on the Flop, many opponents will simply throw in their last chips with a hand like A7.

Here's a typical situation where you may semi-bluff against normal players, but you should think twice against a player who is almost all-in.

Your hand: 98o
Flop: J-7-3 rainbow

If your opponent has bet, you should not make a semi-bluff raise because the value of bluffing is very low. The player who is almost all-in is more likely to call with a hand like A4 or KT than he would in a normal situation. The value of the bluff portion of the semi-bluff is non-existent when a player is all-in or almost all-in.

How an All-In Player Protects the Pot from a bluffer

Once one of the players is all-in, and there are at least two other players in the hand, a side pot is created. The other players in the hand can win both the side pot and the main pot, but the all-in player can only win the main pot, the part of the pot that he had contribute to. If the main pot is relatively big compared to the side pot, the all-in player protects the other players from bluffing against each other. Even if a bluff is successful in that it gets the third player to fold, the bluffer still has to show down his cards against the all-in player to win the main pot. If the bluffer cannot beat the player who is all-in, then there is no value in getting the other player out. The objective of bluffing is to win the pot with a weaker hand than the opponent, by having the opponent fold his stronger hand. But since the all-in player can not fold his hand, this means that a bluff, by definition, cannot work. A successful bluff in this situation will not benefit the bluffer nearly as much. He will only win the side pot when the third player folds, but he still must show down his hand against the all-in player in order to win the main pot. Of course, if the side pot is bigger than the main pot (and this can happen if the all-in player goes all-in in the early stages of the hand), then a bluff may be worthwhile.

Here is an example when you hold a busted flush draw or a busted straight draw on the River.

Your hand: 87o

Board: 6-5-T-Q-K rainbow

You believe the opponent who is not all-in (the third player) holds a weak hand. Since the Turn and the River were both overcards to the Flop, you believe there is a good chance the third player will fold if you bet. If the all-in player had just gone all-in on the Turn, and there is no side pot created yet, then there is no reason for you to think about betting in this case because it is almost inconceivable that you could win the main pot. The all-in player will have your hand beaten unless he miraculously has a hand like 43. In a case like this, the pot is said to be a protected pot because there is no benefit in bluffing. The pot is protected from a steal.

Here is a less extreme case. Say you have A5 with the same board, you have a pair of 5's. The all-in player went all-in on the Turn, and on the River, there is still you and a third player. Now the third player bets to start the side pot. You had hoped he was on a busted straight draw, but if your opponent understands that the pot is protected, then it is likely he has a strong hand.

Home Casino Advantage

In sports, the home team has a slight advantage, even if the talent levels between the two teams are equal. There are two main reasons for this advantage. The first is that the home team is used to

their environment and is sleeping in their own homes and beds while the road team is not. The visitors have travel weariness and are sleeping in hotels that may not have all the comforts of home.

The second reason is that the home crowd will cheer on the home team and support them, which is a nice emotional boost to the home team players. At the same time, the crowd will scream and swear at the opposing team, which is not enjoyable for any player.

In poker, many players enjoy this type of home field advantage also, which I will call the home casino advantage. The players that enjoy the home casino advantage live in the surrounding area and they can go home to their own comforts and beds after playing. They go to the local poker room on a regular basis, so they are comfortable with their environment. They know the dealers, either by face or by name, they know the floormen and they know the waiters and waitresses. They know the specific rules of the poker room, which are not always universal. This whole environment feels almost like a work place and is familiar to them.

Most important, players who enjoy a home casino advantage will know a higher percentage of the other players and their tendencies. When the observant player approaches his seat at a new table, he will already know the characteristics of many of the other players and how they play different hands. If it is a smaller poker room or if the player has played in the room for a relatively long period of time, the skilled player should be able to identify the characteristics of his opponents to a much finer degree than the stereotypes listed in this book. The skilled player with home casino advantage may know a raise from Joe can only mean that player has the nuts, whereas a raise from Bob can mean a bluff or semi-bluff. It usually takes many hands to get to know how others play, so it is a nice advantage to know the players before sitting down. It also allows the player to concentrate more on the one or two players who are unknown to him.

Even the less observant players enjoy home casino advantage to a certain extent. It is amazing how even the worst players still have a decent idea of who the good players are and who the bad players are. And yet, even though they can make this identification, many of them cannot identify that they themselves are bad players! That is truly amazing. The important point here is that even the lesser skilled players have a home casino advantage, whether or not they use it to their fullest advantage is a matter of skill and concentration, or lack thereof.

When I was brand new to casino poker, I sat into a Hold'em tournament in Reno, Nevada in a casino that I had never been to before. I had seen the tournament schedule in a copy of Card Player magazine and thought it would be fun to play in it. The tournament started at 11am on a weekday, and it was cheap, only \$10. That buy-in was just right for me at that time. After almost an hour, I was doing pretty well with a decent chip position. All of a sudden, the dealer says "This is it" as he dealt the cards. The first player shoved all his chips in, and the next two players called, going all-in themselves. I was amazed, they all put in their chips so fast that I thought I was dreaming. I looked down and saw 72o and threw in my hand. The player to my left immediately put his chips all-in and said to me "What are you doing?" I was puzzled. I thought I should have been the one asking that question.

As it turned out, the tournament was not a regular tournament. It was only supposed to last an hour and end at noon, at which point the player with the most chips would win. I was shocked when I found out and rather upset. I thought I had a good chance of winning based on my chip position,

but mostly I was upset at myself for not knowing the exact rules before I sat down. I was disappointed and grumpy for the next few hours. So let my mistake be a lesson to you!

A Road Game

When a player is traveling, they need more time than the home players to identify the skill level of other players. Players will often travel to casinos when major tournaments are being held, such as the big tournaments in Las Vegas, Atlantic City, Los Angeles, Biloxi and Connecticut. Many players go during the major tournaments not only to play in the tournaments but also to play in the side action as well. Not only do these tournaments attract players from across the country, but these tournaments also entice those who live nearby that may not play as often. Just check out the hotel room availabilities when these tournaments are in place, they are usually sold out.

If you are on the road, you must be even more observant than when you are playing in your home poker room. You must watch each player carefully and gather enough information so you can act accordingly when you are mixed up in a hand with them. It makes it all the tougher when on the road since the surroundings are not nearly as comfortable to you as it would be in your home poker room. You don't know the dealers, the floormen, the waiters and waitresses. You aren't entirely sure where the restrooms are located. Once you get situated after a few hours, everything will become more comfortable. But it takes time. Recognize this when you are playing on the road and make the necessary adjustments. Try to get plenty of sleep and to avoid being tired from the traveling.

One year right before the World Series of Poker, I was playing at my local card room when I asked a professional poker player at the 20-40 limit if he was going to go Las Vegas for the World Series of Poker. He said he had no plans to go and was not interested. He said that he would lose his home court advantage since he would not know any of the players there. In the local poker rooms he plays in, he knows just about every player and has studied them for quite some time. Without this knowledge, he felt his winning rate would be significantly lower, plus he would have to pay for the travel expenses, hotel expenses and meals. He did mention that one day he plans on going, but if he does, it would be as a vacation rather than a business trip.

Tells, Feel, Vibes and Image

There are three different kinds of players when it comes to tells. The clueless, the liar and the vault. The clueless player will let you know exactly what he is thinking by his actions. The liar tries to lie to you and fool you with their actions. The vault tries to keep it quiet and act the same no matter what.

The poker players that everyone wants as their opponents are the ones that are clueless. These players are not even aware that people are observing them, and they act the way they feel. If their hand is bad, they will shake their head in disbelief. If their hand is good, all of a sudden they will be at full attention to see when it is their turn to act so they can raise. These players are mostly found in the low limit games or in home games. They would not last very long in the middle and high limit games as their bankroll would quickly shrivel up. The clueless player should stay at home and play poker online since their physical actions often give themselves away. If they played online, this type of disadvantage would not show up. Although if they do act this way when playing poker, it is likely they are not good poker players anyway, so they would likely lose their money sooner or later at online poker as well.

Liars are players that show strength when they are weak and show weakness when they are strong. Aside from their physical actions, liars like to check-raise and slowplay. Check-raises and slowplays can be construed as strategies of feigning weakness when actually strong. They also like to bluff and semi-bluff, which are actions that can be construed as strategies of feigning strength when actually weak. These attributes are sometimes seen through their physical actions as they throw their chips into the pot strongly when they have a weak hand and bet meekly when they have a strong hand. Although some players will actually bet strongly whether they are strong or weak, there are still players who can be counted on to act as liars. This tell may also be available online through the automatic buttons. When players use the automatic buttons, it may reveal the strength of their hand.

Vaults are players that try to act the exact same way without regard to the strength of their hand. It is difficult to tell if they are bluffing or have the nuts because their expression remains the same. We should all aspire to be as far as giving off few signals to the good players. Against the bad players we can try to lie to them and fool them. Against the better players who may understand the “strong means weak,” “weak means strong” ideas, it may be best to switch it around and act to our correct strength, and let them fool themselves. For the most part, it is better to keep the same demeanor and not let subconscious actions and reactions reveal the strength of the hand.

There is a good book called Caro’s Book of Tells by Mike Caro. I first read this book back in 1992. By that time it was already in print for a few years, but it is still a must read. If you would like to examine tells in more detail, I highly recommend this book. It features many photographs of people and what their demeanor and expressions may mean.

Tells are great if you can spot them, but often it is difficult to spot or there are no tells to spot at all. Even without tells, one can still get a feel or a vibe from their opponents. Sometimes a well-known opponent will do something that just feels wrong. If you have experience playing against this opponent, you probably have a decent feel or vibe for his game, so if something is off kilter, you may be able to sense it. This is not a skill that can be taught by reading a book. Rather, it is a skill that is learned through experience playing the game and playing against the specific opponent. This is one of the reasons why studying the opponents is crucial, as this feel or vibe that you pick up can only mean something if you know the normal behavior of your opponents.

There has been poker advice from authors who said you should sometimes act like a crazy man at the table so that other players think you are a maniac. This way when you actually have a strong hand, you will have no problem getting paid off. As this theory goes, one short spat of craziness can lead to getting called down many times over in future hands, thus increasing the expected profits overall. This may work for some who have the personality for it, but for most players this act would be difficult to pull off. It may be best to simply play correctly and solidly. Although playing tight may encourage some players to fold against you more often when you are betting, thus possibly costing you money when you have a strong hand, the corollary to that is you can successfully bluff more often. If you do not use the tight image to bluff or semi-bluff more often, then you are not taking advantage of all the tools available to you.

Other players who play looser can get the calls from other players when they have a strong hand,

but they cannot rely on others folding when they are bluffing or semi-bluffing as much as you can. Since you will be stuck with some disadvantages of a tight image, it is important to take all the advantages that this image affords you. For example, if you decide to semi-bluff on the Turn with a newly formed flush draw, your opponent may be more willing to fold and give you the pot at that time. Against other players who play less solid or more loose than you, your opponent may call since he believes those players are capable of bluffing more often.

Treating each session as part of one big session

Poker is not like sports. In sports, winning or losing is all that is important, it does not matter how much you win by. If the Yankees won a game by a score of 12 to 3, they have won one game, the same as if they had won by a score of 2 to 1. In poker, winning or losing is important of course, but more importantly is how much you win or lose by. If you play five times in one week and have three winning sessions and two losing sessions, that does not say much about the results in that week. It could be that you lost twice as much when you lost as when you won, thus giving you a losing week.

You should think of every session as part of one very long session that you play during your lifetime. It is sometimes difficult to think that way when the cards are running cold and it feels like you are getting bad beat after bad beat. Without thinking in terms of one long session, you will be tempted to try to get back to even during that losing session. This may lead to playing too many hands, calling too many raises, and bluffing in unwarranted spots.

Oftentimes players on the table will say that they are “stuck,” meaning they are losing. But it is all relative. I have heard a player complain that he was stuck \$100 in a 40/80 game, when \$100 is an invisible blip in a game of that limit. Thinking that he was stuck gave him a negative mentality, and he started to play more aggressively at incorrect times to try to get back to even. He left 10 hours later really stuck, with a loss of \$5000. So do not worry about trying to get back to even for the night, the week or the trip. Just think in terms of playing each hand correctly and think of your wins and losses as a whole for your entire life if you are a long term winner. If you are a winning player, this will also make the inevitable losing streaks a little easier to handle psychologically. If you have not shown as much success in the past, you can think of today as the first day of the rest of your Hold'em life.

Emotions at the Table

For many players, playing poker is an emotional experience. When one wins, there is a feeling of elation and a natural high. One feels on top of the world, like an Olympic Champion. This is great, but the reverse is also possible. When the eventual losing session happens, some players will feel depressed. Poker can be an emotional roller coaster. It is how one handles these situations that differentiates the winning player from the losing player.

Here is how a losing player would handle a losing session:

1. Go on tilt. This means playing a lot more hands than the player knows is best and playing them very aggressively. There are different levels of tilt. It's more obvious to witness a player going on tilt at the blackjack table than at the poker table. We've all seen it, and many of us probably have experienced it too. When one is losing, one all of a sudden gets the idea to bet it all to try to win it all back in one hand. Without the advantage of counting at the blackjack table, these players

will all of a sudden put out a \$200 bet on the next hand even though they have been playing \$25 bets. This attitude is clearly not a good idea at the poker table and may cause a player to play hands that have negative expectation even if the player knows how to play better than that. It may mean as little as calling raises a touch too liberally in the big blind, to open-raising with J5s in the cutoff, to three betting pre-Flop with ATo against an early position raise from a good player. It's important to handle one's own emotions and not adjust negatively due to a losing session.

2. Being upset at the dealer. Some players don't go on tilt, but instead they blame all their problems on the dealer. Calling the dealer names, throwing cards hard into the muck, throwing cards at the dealer, stuff like that. It can become ugly, and it is something we should all refrain from. The dealers are just there to make a living. As for cheating dealers, the casino cameras generally catch everything, and the casinos have even more incentive than you to assure everything is on the up and up. For the most part, angry players that get upset at the dealer are not even accusing them of cheating, they are simply accusing the dealer of treating them poorly by not putting the right card on the board. Obviously this is just ridiculous, but in the heat of the battle, it may be difficult for some players to handle themselves. Not only is it important for every player to try to control their own emotions, but also for other players to protect the dealer if it gets too far. This may mean standing up to the other player or calling a floorperson. No one likes to play when there are angry players at the table, in the long run, and it could drive some recreational players away from the game. This is bad for the game, which means it is bad for the wallets of the good players.

3. Being upset at a lucky player. Even worse than blaming the dealer is when a player who gets a bad beat starts to rag on the player that gave him the bad beat. The supposed good player starts telling the bad player how bad a player he actually is. Of course, this is horrible for the game, as we would all like the worse players to stay in the game for as long as possible. No one wants the bad players to get an education, and that is what some of the good players try to do by demeaning the bad players. Sometimes it is useful to take the good player aside and simply let him know how you feel in a non-confrontational way with statements such as "Hey, I know he really gave you a bad beat, but you know he'll give it back to you in the long run, don't scare him away, please!"

Here is how a winning player would handle a losing session:

1. Analyze what went wrong. It is important to think about what went wrong. Maybe you did not make a mistake and the cards just landed the way they did. Maybe you lost due to random bad luck or maybe you lost because you made some mistakes. It is important to think about what happened to see if you actually made a mistake and can correct those mistakes in future sessions or if it was something that was completely uncontrollable.

2. Learn from your mistakes. The times that a player learns the most is when they lose. After a winning session, it is very easy to walk away happy and feeling complacent, thinking that everything went just as planned. With all the positive thoughts, it is difficult to even think back to see what mistakes you made at the table that day. It is when you have a losing session that your mind starts to think about the mistakes you made. This is a great exercise, as you will learn from these mistakes and learn not to make the same mistakes in the future. The winning players use their losing sessions as a stepping stone to future winning sessions by learning from their mistakes.

3. Learn from the volatility of the game. Limit Hold'em is a volatile game. It is possible that a very good player may expect to make \$30 per hour in a \$20/\$40 game, but on any given hour, they would not be surprised to win or lose \$400. On the worst days, a string of six bad hours may mean a \$2000 loss for even the best players. Of course, the winning players will see more good days than bad, but the bad days are inevitable. If Limit Hold'em was a game of only skill and no luck or randomness, then it would be a game more like chess rather than poker. In chess, the grandmasters of the game do not have the opportunity to win money from the novices and the bad players. Even stubborn chess players would not be willing to bet against a grandmaster, as they know they have no chance. In poker, everyone has a chance in the short run, but not everyone has a chance in the long run. The short run is easy to see, that is what we bring to the cashier's cage to cash out at the end of the session. But the long run is difficult for many to see, especially the bad players. Without this luck factor and without the bad players having their share of winning sessions, poker would not be profitable at all, and there would not be any opportunities for the winning players. The good players will learn from the volatility of the game and try to chalk it up as "one of those days," and move on to the next day.

Observing the play of the game when out of a hand

It is easy to concentrate on other things outside of the game when you have already folded your hand. There are many distractions that may be available. Many poker rooms have television sets set up within easy eyesight of the players. When there is a sporting event on, it is easy to pay attention to it on television instead of the poker game, especially if you have a wager on the event.

It is also easy to read the current edition of CardPlayer magazine, Poker Digest or a newspaper while waiting for the next hand. With cell phones these days, it seems making a phone call is a useful thing to do to fill up the time in between hands. Clearly this can not be a good idea for our poker game, but we still do it, I admit I do it myself more often than I should.

When you are busy paying attention to something away from the table, you will miss the play of the hand and possibly the emotional state of different players. If one of the players just got dealt two bad beats in a row, that may change the way he plays from that point forward. If you were not paying attention to the hand, you would have completely missed it. It may be just as difficult to concentrate in online poker. At home, there may be even more distractions, including talking to other people, surfing the internet and reading a book (hey, if you are reading this book while playing poker, STOP!! Do one at a time, not both.)

Eavesdropping at the Table

Society usually looks down on people who eavesdrop. People want their business and conversations to be private, otherwise, they would be talking to you about it. Most people have been taught as children to avoid eavesdropping and hindering someone else's privacy. But at the poker table, eavesdropping is fair game, and you should use it to your advantage. When you listen to two other players having a conversation, you may gather some useful information about them. When they start talking about how they play, what they folded, the opinions they have of other players, and information that pertain to poker, that is when you should be listening carefully. You should be keeping your eyes open to see what other players are doing, you should also be keeping your ears open to hear if the other players are giving you clues about their own play or other player's play.

Book knowledge versus execution and experience

Learning poker by reading good books is a great exercise. If you are reading the right books, you will be able to help your own game. Reading good books will give you new ideas that you may not have thought about. It may also clarify your own ideas. However reading cannot replace actual experience and it may not improve your execution of the hand. You will know how to play a hand correctly after thinking about it for a few minutes, but that will not help you during the hand if you do not execute correctly. Two things are needed in order to execute the correct play. The first is to identify the situation when the play can be used profitably. The second is to actually put it in play without giving your intentions away. The game of poker goes quite fast, so you will have to identify the correct situations very quickly and then execute properly. Thinking about certain situations and reading up on the ones that this book has covered will help you get to that point a lot faster once you are playing at the tables, but experience cannot be replaced. You still have to go out there and play, and execute the correct plays, and that is easier said than done for some people.

When is it time to leave?

A lot of players will think about leaving a game when they are up big, but usually stay longer when they are down big. This phenomenon is most common in home games, as the losers are always the ones that want to keep playing. Meanwhile the winners are the ones who claim they need to rush home for various reasons.

A friend of mine named Dean used to talk about this phenomenon and say how it should be the exact opposite. He would say that the players who are winning are playing their best game, are in control of the game and are feared at the table at that time. While the players who are losing may be on tilt, are often out of control and have a tougher time bluffing successfully. So it should be the winners that want to stay because they should expect to be winning more than usual, while the losers are the ones that should want to leave as they have the expectation of losing more than usual.

Of course if you are a good player and can control your emotions even when you are losing, you should be playing if you still think you have positive expectation. But often players cannot tell when their emotions are getting the best of them. When the negative emotions hit them, they are not usually thinking rationally, they are simply focused on trying to get unstuck and get back to even.

If you have lost to several bad beats recently, you may find yourself paralyzed to bet or raise when you normally would. The recent bad beats may have clouded your mind and make you afraid to take the chance and get hit by another one. If this is the case, it is probably better to leave or at least take a long walk to shake the bad beats off. Come back and play when you can play at your best.

So the next time you are winning and feel the urge to run with the money, think again. Is the game still juicy? Are you playing well? If so, consider staying and playing some more. Try to complement this with reducing your hours when you are losing, when maybe you are not playing your best.